

STATE PARKS

A LIVING LEGACY

By Marc Rapport

The Greatest Generation has left quite a legacy across the United States, and nowhere is that more evident than in the South Carolina State Park Service, where 16 of the parks – from the mountains to the sea – were built by the men of the Civilian Conservation Corps during the depths of the Great Depression. The CCC, established in 1933 as the first project of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, employed out-of-work young men who planted trees, built roads and bridges and were the genesis for state park systems around the country.

"The CCC was at the heart of the conservation movement of the 1930s and '40s," said Chad Prosser, Director of the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism, which manages the State Park Service. "It produced many of our state and national parks and encouraged us to think more about conservation and preservation."

In fact, across South Carolina, mountainside roads and lodges, seaside cabins, woodlands ponds and lakes, dams and spillways, community meeting houses and much more were carved out of eroded countryside and mountain wilderness by CCC workers living in camps.

"The work done by the CCC pretty much defined what a park was supposed to be, supposed to look like and supposed to do; in many ways that still exists to this day," said Phil Gaines, a veteran park ranger who is now assistant director of the S.C. State Park Service.

Using local materials, strong arms and backs and an inventive spirit, the CCC developed 16 of the state's current 46 state parks: Aiken, Barnwell, Cheraw, Chester, Colleton, Edisto Beach, Givhans Ferry, Hunting Island, Lake Greenwood, Lee, Myrtle Beach (the first to open, in 1935), Oconee, Paris Mountain, Poinsett, Sesquicentennial and Table Rock.

"The first things that come to mind for a lot of people when they think of the CCC in our state parks are the lodge at Table Rock and the cabins at Oconee, or maybe the cabins on the marsh at Edisto Beach or at Hunting Island," Gaines says, "But there are a lot of other projects worth remembering and noticing."

Little things, for instance, like intricate stone culverts at Kings Mountain in the Piedmont, or the coquina bathhouse at Poinsett in the High Hills of Santee near Sumter, or the signs made of concrete (even though they look like wood, as Gaines likes to point out) using the local sand from the sand hills around Sesquicentennial State Park in Columbia.

To get the whole story of the CCC experience in South Carolina, go to Lake Greenwood State Recreation Area, where an extensive, interactive exhibit tells the story of the men put to work by the CCC during President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

And then look around. Besides terraced lakefront landscaping and other projects that remain to this day, Lake Greenwood bears silent remembrance to the great events that brought the CCC's work to a sudden end: blocks of stone still sit near the entrance from a project left undone when the men were called to fight in what quickly became known as the Second World War.

"We promised them we would finish their work, and we did," Gaines says. "And what's really cool to me personally is that some of those gentlemen are still around today, and they still come by and say to our rangers, 'You take good care of our parks, OK?'"

"And we tell them we will."

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